Who Needs Acceptance?
Romans 12:1-13
October 20, 1974

John McCormick Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Last Sunday morning, under the title "No Strings Attached", we thought about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We thought about the incredible love of that father; a love that had him waiting and watching for his young son's return, a love that ordered a banquet of reunion instead of saying "I told you so" when the son showed up hungry, dirty and broke: a love that reached out and embraced the son before the well-rehearsed confession could be uttered: a love that went out into the field to reclaim the elder brother who became prodigal because of his offended sense of fair play.

The message was "Grace": God's Grace: what St. Augustine called "prevenient grace" - that divine benevolence of God toward all men apart from their merit: that inclination of God to come to us, forgiving and accepting long before we consider aaking for it.

Now, let us admit that we are always a little uneasy about that. Our reaction to the idea of Grace is often discomfort if not disagreement. As was the case with the Elder Brother in the story we are a bit offended by the suggestion that God loves and accepts those blatant violators of the common morality as much as He loves and accepts us. As was the case with the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day, we much prefer a system in which each man earns his own way: a system in which good men are rewarded by God and bad men are rejected by God.

On a little deeper level we find the doctrine of grace assaults our ego. The theologians have always known that we are most reluctant to give up the idea that we are able to influence the deity. And there are problems theologically.

John Calvin was the Reformation thinker who built a system of thought on the idea of grace. However, the Calvinists who followed him were more Calvinistic than he was. They deduced that if God loves men apart from any merit or deserving, He - in His infinite wisdom - must have chosen some men for salvation and others for damnation. Beyond that, as an affirmation of grace, they deduced that you were headed for heaven or hell and that there was nothing you could do to alter your ultimate destination in either case.

In any event there are some serious problems and questions raised by the idea of grace. And, I for one, am very sorry that Jesus did not anticipate our theological sluggishness and add another chapter to the Parable of the Prodigal Son. For once we have dealt with and understood the grace of the Father - His magnificent accepting love - the question becomes, "What happened the morning after?" I'm most hesitant to add to Holy Writ but this, I submit, is what transpired. Promptly at 6:00 A.M., the father roused his young son from sleep, handed him a rake and a hoe and said, "Let's get up and get going - there's work to be done". The evening before there was a party, a celebration of reunion: there were friends in: eating and drinking and making merry. But I cannot conceive of life continuing on that basis. Rather, life in the father's house proceeded on the basis of certain rules and responsibilities. When the Prodigal came to himself and returned, he was accepted and forgiven and, I submit, given back the demands that accompanied living under his father's roof. His errant behavior did not affect his father's love and willingness to forgive. But if he wanted to live as his father's son he had to act like it.

The story of grace is only half told until it deals with the morning after; until it sets out the demands of living in grace; until the cost is tabulated. Thus the sermon on "Who Needs Acceptance?"

The text for the Sermon is Romans 12:1-13: a remarkable passage of scripture, much used around Stewardship time. It is, as you heard, a list of rather concrete ethical demands. We will not be looking at the nature of those demands this morning, but rather the fact, simply, that they are where they are. For, in all of literature, there is no more dramatic shift in emphasis than occurs between the 11th and 12th chapters of Romans.

For eleven chapters Paul has been writing about grace. The doctrine has been systematically articulated, plumbed, refined and explained. Those eleven chapters have been studied more than any other section of the Bible.

But then, in chapter 12, with the word "therefore", there is a complete turn about. The reader, having been told that in Jesus Christ God has once and for all redeemed mankind apart from obedience to any law, suddenly finds himself being told what to do and what not to do: "Therefore, brethren...present your bodies as a living sacrifice ...do not be conformed to this world, etc..."

Some have found inconsistency here in Paul's thought. If we are saved by Grace why bother telling people to do or not to do anything? It has been suggested that Paul lost his nerve - that he really didn't trust the radical freedom he was proclaiming. And that in Romans 12 he is guilty of tying strings to God's love - in the way religion always seems to do. A careful reading, however, shows that this is not the case. Christian people are to do certain things and refrain from doing other things not in order to win God's love - but because of it. And that makes all the difference in the world. It's just that belief without commensurate behavior is sterile: in fact it's not belief at all. And grace without demand - is not grace - but easy indulgence that ends up as an ethical disaster.

Unfortunately, we don't always do a very good job at holding the two together. Historically, either grace or demand have been emphasized as a product of other factors going on at the time. Good theology is always timely. For instance, Grace is the cornerstone of the Presbyterian/Reformed Tradition. The doctrine closest to the Reformed heart is that "we are saved by grace through faith and not by works". That is the best of all possible news to men stumbling under a load of guilt heaped on their shoulders by a legalistic approach to religion. At the time of the Reformation, the Church had reduced the Gospel to doing things which the Church said to do. And in that situation, the suggestion that men are loved by God regardless of how many masses they attend or confessions they make, is very good news indeed.

In Jesus' day the predominant religious expression was legalistic. The Scribes and Pharisees had reduced the Faith of Israel to obeying some 600 separate religious rules. In that situation the suggestion that God loves you if you obey half the rules or none of the rules or all of the rules can be very good news.

And for latter-day legalists of all stripes: for religious people who can't escape their sense of guilt and unworthiness the Gospel of Grace is liberating good news.

The late Paul Tillich captured the essence of God's Grace in an unforgetable paragraph:

> "You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything: do not perform anything: do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." (A.D. Sept. 1972 P.40)

But what if legalism is not at all the predominant religious expression? What if it is the opposite - i.e. a general sense that nothing matters much: that it is of no ultimate consequence whether you obey the rules or ignore the rules? In that situation, the suggestion that you are accepted by God doesn't mean anything at all, because you weren't worried about that in the first place. What, for instance, if there are no rules that carry ultimate weight? What if, unlike the Pharisees - or the Reformers, we live in a climate where the individual is encouraged to do his own thing regardless of the consequences? What if the problem is how to live meaningfully with freedom? Who needs acceptance in that situation?

Dr. Albert Outler, distinguished professor at Perkins School of Theology, suggests that "There never has been a generation since Cain and Abel as free as this one - and never one less joyous in its freedom". Outler points out that in our day every external authority has been successfully challenged and comments: "Freedom is a great boon, but until we discover what it is for, as well as what it is from its blessings will continue tragically ambivalent...We keep telling modern man 'You are free to accept your acceptance in your unacceptability'. And he says 'Ho Hum.'" (Thesis Theological Cassette Vol. 2 No. 3 The Crisis that Engulfs Us.)

Dr. Karl Menninger, in his book, What Ever Became of Sin, holds that part of what is wrong with our society is that there are no ultimate criteria against which to measure our lives, and consequently a weakening of any sense of responsibility for our behavior...(See Ch. 3)

And William Muehl, Professor at Yale Divinity School and an attorney, speaks very clearly about the contemporary situation: "Any definition of redemption which denies ultimate significance to human initiative in the drama of salvation is self-defeating (P. 35)....To go among men who tremble....who walk in fear of breaking some law - who believe they are in danger of being ignited by some cosmic pyromaniac..and tell them they are accepted is to proclaim good news of the most authentic kind....But this is hardly our situation, is it? The people to whom the Gospel is to speak today are.....wandering about aimlessly, troubled by the increasing suspicion that no one literally gives a damn about what they do. The problem of our time is.....a terrible dread, a deep anxiety that the whole show is indeed an archaic charade. To tell such men that they are accepted without reference to the quality of their lives, is to confirm the worst of their darkest fears." (All the Damned Angels, P.38)

The family is a microcosm of that dynamic. Sensitive parents know well that love is not indulgence. Children quickly understand that a parent who does not react negatively to any behavior, however bizarre or offensive, is not expressing love - but simply doesn't care. And it is not unusual for such children to continue acting out ever worsening destructive behavior patterns in a desperate effort to force the parent into doing something that says - "you matter to me. I care about what you are."

Love takes us seriously. God's love takes very seriously the quality of our lives. Social Science can help us explain why people act the way they do, but something very important about being human is assaulted when individual responsibility is eliminated, and when accountability no longer matters.

In the musical "West Side Story" there is a delightful song "Gee, Officer Krupke" sung by one of the street gangs. The boys have been analyzed and explained thoroughly: sociologists, economists, social workers, psychologists have announced that they can't help what they've become. That is - they have been subjected to sociological grace: but they rebel - their song comes down firmly on the theology of individual responsibility: with exuberance they sing:

> "O, Officer Krupke, you've done it again.
> This boy don't need a job, he needs a year in the pen.
> It ain't just a question of misunderstood;
> Deep down inside him he's no good...
>
> We're no good, we're no good, we're no earthly good.
> The best of us is no damn good."

That is to say, the young men will not allow themselves to be explained away as social mistakes. They refuse to agree to the dubious pholosophy that a human being is incapable of being responsible and making responsible moral choices. (See W. Muehl, P.33)

God, in His infinite love: does hold us responsible for our behavior. Let there be no question about that. If He did not care how we lived He would not love us. I am not suggesting that God condemns us for our mistakes. But I am suggesting that how you and I live our lives does matter a great deal to Him.

Think carefully about the Parable again. The father's love was limitless, but the prodigal son had to"come to himself". He had to leave the far country and appear at the end of the road. He had to reorient his behavior and be in the place where the father's love could touch him. It is not legalistic to suggest that the same is true for us. Nor does it contradict the idea of grace, to suggest that one who knows the love of God lives in a way that reflects that love. Grace is the ultimate expression of God's love: it is not indulgence.

The story is told of a nursery school child who was happily bringing his parents a ceramic Christmas gift he had been working on for weeks. At the magic moment, the gift slipped from his hands and smashed on the floor. His father, wanting to comfort him said, "Don't cry. It doesn't matter."

But his mother, much wiser in such things, swept the boy into her arms and said, "Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal." And she wept with her son. (Ibid, P.39)

You and I need to know that we are loved of God. We need His Grace - His acceptance. We need also to know that our lives matter to Him. That He loves us enough to care about how we live.

Amen.